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Metropolitan (Im)migrants in the "Lettered City"

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Stacey Balkan,

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Abstract: In her article "Metropolitan (Im)migrants in the 'Lettered City'" Stacey Balkan employs Ángel Rama's discussion of audience as a means of analyzing a Latin American diaspora that exists beyond the "rational periphery" of the state. Herein, the term diaspora is redefined as a translocal phenomenon wherein the metropolitan (im)migrant moves from rural margin to urban center. Normative definitions of exile — persons displaced from autonomous nation-states — are likewise scrutinized in the context of what Balkan terms a "post-contemporary city of letters." This post-contemporary city is the subject of what Mabel Moraña refers to as a "subaltern boom" — that is, the McOndo generation. Balkan discusses the work of Roberto Bolaño, Daniel Alarcón, and Junot Díaz who employ such narrative signatures as invisibility to reify the ephemeral (or "lettered") city while also amplifying the predicament of the now urban Indian living within its borders.

Stacey BALKAN

Metropolitan (Im)migrants in the "Lettered City"

In "Literature and Exile," Ángel Rama offers that there are three audiences to whom the writers of the Latin American diaspora speak: an artificial nation-state (that which was created by Spain's colonial interests); an amorphous indigenous population that exists beyond the "rational periphery" of that state; and the expansive diaspora — a city of exile existing beyond maps, or as Junot Díaz suggests, a city carved "directly into the imagination of a people" (225): herein the term diaspora — usually reserved for communities of persons displaced, indeed expelled from specific nation-states — is recast as a translocal community of (im)migrants collectively moving from a precolonial "Macondo" (the now iconic setting of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien Años de Soledad*) to the globalized cities of a transnational "McOndo" (the postmodern recapitulation of Macondo). Indeed, while exile for the Boom generation implied movement beyond the fixed nation-state, exile for what some theorists suggest is a "subaltern Boom" (Díaz, Daniel Alarcón, Roberto Bolaño) implies movement within the state — from its periphery to its center (see, e.g., McClennen; McClennen and Fitz; Moraña).

The ephemeral Latin American city (or "symbolic diorama") persisted over time as the imagined projection of its poets — imperialist and Indigenous alike. Consequently, the felt experiences of the city itself were displaced by fantasy. The actual residents of the living city were made invisible in narratives that animate the city and lay stagnant its living populations. Invisible and anachronistic (or atemporal and existing outside of real time) the living inhabitants of the "lettered city" (*los indios*) live in a state of suspended exile living within the imagined city, but cast outside of a specific urban real where imperial grammar makes no allowance for the flourishes and the excesses of the Macondo clowns. This imagined perception of Indian persons has engendered narrative caricatures that render the Indians as indeed clown-like (see Alarcón, "City"). Indeed, such images and, more notably, stark invisibility have become signatures of the fiction of such authors as Bolaño, Alarcón, and Díaz, whose narratives reify the ephemeral city while also amplifying the predicament of the now urban Indian living within its borders. For these authors, "the great cities no longer [stand] as solitary bastions amid hostile wastes ... [instead] the real city [expands] anarchically despite the efforts of those who [wish] to restrain and order its growth" (Rama 82).

The Latin American landscape — gritty and urban over and against ethereal and rural — both recuperates a precolonial voice (which was, according to some McOndo writers, ostensibly whitewashed by magic) and likewise suggests a specifically postmodern voice that is a marked departure from colonial conceptions of history and being. If, as illustrated in Rama's "Lettered City," the Latin American "nation emerged from a purely written reality reserved for a strict minority of lettered officials" — a means of "surveilling" and containing indigenous persons—the post-contemporary novel, which celebrates the flourishes, excesses, and barbarism of a precolonial grammar, offers a departure from such strictures and (perhaps more to the point) a voice (Stephen 388). They offer "the syntactic and lexical creativity of informal speech" in novels whose subversive characters mimic the sixteenth-century graffiti that Cortés and his minions daily white-washed (Rama 32). Bolaño, Alarcón, and Díaz offer texts which are largely phenomenological and which posit a subjectivity in the corporeal experience of otherwise invisible persons who occupy a specifically urban place. Their invisibility is itself both a signature of the post-contemporary urban real (as over and against the purely semantic colonial imaginary), as well as a means of replacing an edifying and hegemonic written account with a sort of liberating ephemera — what Rama characterizes as the antithesis of structuralist attempts to employ existing signifiers in the pursuit of narrative truth. Such neat constructions are tantamount to the sanitizing efforts of the *letrados* themselves and deny the possibility of a reality beyond the text (or city).

Considering Alma Guillermoprieto's illustration of the excesses of, for example, Mexico City — her "city of garbage" — over and against Rama's ordered ("lettered") city — it is at least curious that in the McOndo plea for a departure from magic (that is, from what was seen as a whimsical whitewashing of colonial brutality), there is no acknowledgement of its brilliant excesses. Magical Realism — in supplanting textual coherence and collapsing the ideal and the real — disables the

forementioned structuralist tendency. McOndo — as ideologically conceived — is merely the "lettered city" now globalized. Thus it follows that its inherent semiotics are informed by the projected categories of global capitalism in the same way that "the order of signs" in Macondo appeared as the "realm of the Spirit" but was indeed a specific projection of Spain's imperialist designs (Rama 17). McOndo is herein simply a new "lettered city and its signs/signifiers are referents for the transnational system of commerce that has subsumed the colonial empire — the "late capitalist" modality that for example Fredric Jameson posit as a source of aesthetic change in "postmodern" (read post-World War II) art forms. The real marvelous — to be found between the colonial polis and the global city — is best represented in novels that blur such rationalized peripheries and that emphasize the *différance* over and against an imaginary real. If the Macondo tradition — magical iterations of the "real marvelous" made readable through fantasy (see Carpentier) — was an attempt to articulate the imperialist order of colonial Latin America, the McOndo tradition — gritty and urban, postmodern, and corporate — is an attempt to articulate the disorder of the post-contemporary Latin American city and both fail in their attempt to reduce a polychromatic Latin American landscape to a stagnating monolith.

In Rama's illustration of an ostensible "library of Babel" — the sixteenth-century urban planning project that replaced an agrarian landscape with a series of artificial colonial metropolises — "the universe suddenly became congruent" as a consequence of what was a "hygienic, ascetic rage that ... lay the senseless loss of millions of volumes" of presumably indigenous narratives (Borges 115-16). This ordered colonial polis — that "idolized secret hexagon that sheltered Him" (Borges 117) — was comprised of a fairly monochromatic center poised against the "barbarous denizens of the countryside" (Rama 11). Magic lent a subversive disorder to this constrained colonial metropolis — its perfect symmetries and sanitizing nomenclature undermined by delightful ambiguity — and thus Márquez's mutable (and immortal) Melquíades as an antidote to Macondo's colonial viceroy. Because the lettered city of the sixteenth century favored "potentiality over reality," characters like the distinctly post-structural Melquiades (a being who exists beyond time and space) offers an antidote indeed. Similarly, characters like Oscar in Alarcón's "City of Clowns" (part of his collection *War by Candlelight*) offer what is clearly a projection of an internal ideological framework. Herein the otherwise postcolonial clowns are recast as "active cultural media rather than as objects of cultural study by the sanctioned ignorance of the metropolitan migrant" (Spivak 9). Alarcón's reimagined "metropolitan migrant" displaces the sixteenth-century *letrado* and a new conception of the city is imagined into existence by the "barbarous denizens" of Alarcón's Lima. A "muddy amalgam" indeed, the post-contemporary city of signs of Alarcón's imagination is likewise a polyvocal and polycentric projection of those barbarous denizens from Mexico City to Lima — characters like Bolaño's "subway poets" and "visceral realists," who appeal to an expressly underground (and specifically internal/Indigenous) logic (see Mignolo and Tlostanova).

Borges's ruminations on the lunacy of artificial order and the paradoxical nature of the library (or universe) in his "Library of Babel" prophecy the sort of perfectly articulated disorder we see in Bolaño's Mexico City (during the chaos of the 1968 revolution) and also in Alarcón's postmodern Lima, which exposes Lima's state sanctioned oppression. Likewise, in Díaz's novel we are entreated to the efforts of Rafael Trujillo who attempts to sanitize colonial Santo Domingo with a brand of genocide that recalls Cortés himself — both raping the daughters of his island and slaying their fathers and brothers. Díaz, through multiple narrative perspectives and an excessive use of popular allusions — comic book heroes and the like, who seem the only reasonable metaphors for the surreal actions of the "Trujillato" — captures the disorder of Santo Domingo in a novel that is both brutally violent and strangely magical. And Alarcón in *Lost City Radio* trades the gritty urban real of his "city of clowns" for a parody of the semiotic city that offers what seems a perfect means of punctuating the endless debate over the merit of the Macondo and the McOndo — two narrative traditions both attempting to paint a cohesive image of a landscape that is anything but. *Lost City Radio* presents a post-apocalyptic "city of letters," whose cartography is hauntingly rigid as it is simply an ordered series of numbered ghettos, all of which correspond to formerly indigenous communities. This post-apocalyptic take on Rama's "city of letters" recalls such images as Julio Cortazár's *62: A Model Kit*, but it more so offers the kind of scathing satire we would find in García Márquez's fiction.

In Cortazár's depiction of the anonymity of the city — its persistent placelessness — there is no specificity, but also no magic. Cortazár's "city" is a kind of amorphous McOndo: "the city was not explained; it was" (19): "I know my city by a crouching expectation, something that isn't yet fear but which has its shape ... in my city the elevators like glass boxes that go forward in a zigzag way cross covered bridges between two buildings and the city opens up below and vertigo increases ... my city is uncounted dirty toilets, with peepholes in the doors that have no locks, stinking of ammonia and the showers are in one enormous room with a grimy floor" (31-32). The use of the abject — e.g., "dirty toilets" — invites the excesses which were sanitized by the Castilian projects, but Cortazár's novel remains in the semiotic. Rama's comment about the signs of the city as "neutral registers" resonates in Cortazár's anonymous city, while in Díaz's Santo Domingo the signs are obvious cultural (and ideological) projections and the characters' experiences are specifically colored by them. Similarly, Alarcón's "Newtown" (*Lost City Radio*) offers a charted topography far from fantastical and that postulates a decolonial (or post-contemporary) present that likewise falls outside of the parameters of colonial logic — a series of corrupt syllogisms that posit the civilized European against the Indian and offer that exhausted axiom that the civilizing hand of the European comes at the cost of a genocide or two.

Rama's image of the "lettered city" wherein the "governing authority [is] located at the center and the living spaces [are] assigned to respective social strata radiating from the center in concentric circles" (57) is recast in these texts as multiple circles with multiple peripheries. Distinctly mutable and ever mutating, these polycentric cities are made palpable by, for example, Bolaño in *Amulet*. The "schizophrenic butcheries" of Mexico City are herein actualized: the city's "slightly humid air conjured up unstable geometries, solitudes, schizophrenia, and butchery" and poised against this "schizophrenia" and "butchery" was the "hierarchical" space of the university — "the most precious jewel of the lettered city" — under siege by a set of revolutionaries, who represent the paradoxical institutionalization of the socialist revolution and the cooptation of Marxism by the neocolonial Mexican government (*Amulet* 67). The 1968 massacre at Tlatelolco is the setting of the novel and the protagonist, Auxilio Lacouture narrates her tale while trapped in a bathroom stall in UNAM (Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México) during the siege. Herein, Auxilio is moved from the periphery to the center and Mexico City itself becomes the treacherous antagonist made all the more palpable with magic. The narration is disrupted countless times by what appear to be hallucinations and the reader is thrust forward and back through time in a way that feels far more Macondo than McOndo. That the novel culminates in a fantastical revolution of children marching toward their freedom in the illusory painting that Auxilio casts on the wall above the toilet **is** an homage to García Márquez. The sardonic placement of Pedro Garfias — a "subway poet" in his own right living in exile from fascist Spain — is perhaps an omniscient wink at the reader that such monolithic depictions of the "Boom generation" are problematic indeed. Presumably the death of Garfias in 1967 (which opens the novel) foreshadows what will be yet another tragedy: first the "generation of '27" (that is, the Spanish *avante garde* poets from which Garfias hailed) and then Tlatelolco — illustrated in the novel as the "subway poets" or "lost children." Perhaps the "subway poets" — those "vulgar ... urban masses" of Rama's imagination — were departing from what they saw as an exploitation of the "picturesque local color" celebrated by Garfias by being instead vulgar and viscerally present (Rama 103). For the "subway poets" — Bolaño's visceral realists — "the living popular culture of the moment was not the conservative, declining folk heritage of the countryside that urban intellectuals [again like Pedro Garfias] admired for its picturesque local color. It was the vital, vulgar culture of the urban masses, who drew on rural folk traditions as the natural matrix of their own creativity, but did so without a nostalgic urge to conserve" (Rama 103).

The "urge to encapsulate the whole" of any nation in a picturesque schema that celebrates only the past through what magical realists like Salman Rushdie see as the "disease of nostalgia" is shattered by the visceral realists who eschew such romantic tendencies opting instead for a dynamic interpretation of Latin America's present (75). The lyrics of the subway poets instead "testified" to "the experience of rapid urbanization and to the emergence of a working class as a major historical protagonist" (Rama 103). Auxilio Lacouture (the novel's protagonist) as the "mother of [a new] Mexican poetry" is that new "historical protagonist" (Bolaño 1; Rama 103). What Bolaño does well in

Amulet is the illustration of the interstice of the modern revolution and the postmodern corporate polis that ultimately supplants it. The year 1968 — which both bifurcates the novel and functions as the moment that inaugurates Mexican post-modernity — is a narrative suture. If the revolution of 1910 promised a democratic nation-state and a concomitant redistribution of land and wealth, the revolution (and massacre) of 1968 restored a neocolonial brand of order that brought about a resurgence in federal corruption, and marked 1968 as a specific moment of return indeed — not to an idyllic past, but to the nineteenth-century dictatorship of Porfirio Díaz. This context offers a concrete framework for an otherwise magical novel whose temporality hinges on a distinctly unreliable narrator who is cast as a metaphor for the revolution itself. She is the image of the iconic masses — no national identity, no past, no face — an amorphous persona who is the iconic Latin American Indian made wretched by the colonial era. In this way, the ephemeral disrupts the real, but does not replace it and thus the ideological imperative of McOndo enhances the Macondo aesthetic.

The temporal disruption Bolaño employs interrupts the reader's imaginative resistance in much the same way as magical realism and the reader is sufficiently disoriented. In this way, he/she is able to render a tale that answers the call for geopolitical specificity, but illustrates likewise the nuances of a specifically Latin American space that persists as a slowly decolonizing site of chaos and that adheres to an atemporal syntax whose grammar is largely nonlinear, illogical (as it counters normative conceptions of Indian subjectivity and agency), and excessively real — that is, not imaginary or ideal. Alarcón's title story "War by Candlelight" in his 2006 collection *War by Candlelight* is likewise atemporal: moving between decades while narrating the ascent of the Shining Path, which he poises against the urban elite of Lima. His protagonist muses about his memory — "half-eaten by moths and flies, incomplete records of moments in no semblance of order" — while likewise wondering whether the liminal space between neocolonial Lima and freedom had a name as if "the mapmakers [had] made it [there] yet" (116). For Fernando, the story's protagonist, the "city appeared strange ... and ... the jungle had the glow of an apparition" (120). Both are ephemeral, both intangible. Herein we see actualized the city as urban real against the jungle as magical, or Macondo — an "apparition." The implication is that neither site can be articulated in any cohesive or intelligible way given the constraints of colonial (and postcolonial) syntax. The illusive nature of the jungle is no less ephemeral than the city itself; both are "strange" to a narrator who likewise defies colonial logic in his desire to collapse the disparate class hierarchy that posits his own classmate as a servant and his father as her master.

In "City of Clowns" (also in the collection *War by Candlelight*), the urban spaces of both Pasco (from where Alarcón's protagonist Oscar or *chino* migrates) and also Lima — the urban real turned carnivalesque — are similarly illusive. But while Lima is characterized as "disgraced" — a place where "dying is the local sport" — Pasco is the now urban periphery made capitalist and wretched — "its concept of time [now] mechanized [by] capitalism's ticking clock ... where miners expel their "tarry black mucous — the color of money" (20-21). Pasco is described as "neither city nor country ... isolated and poor, high on a cold Andean puna ... but in a very specific way ... urban" (20-21). Again, the notion of an "ordered city" with a concrete center and periphery is replaced by an increasingly urban Peru where the multiple peripheries become ostensible centers of a now polycentric capitalist economy. Lima shifts constantly: the "skyline changes, a new building goes up, or one comes crashing down ... but the city persists" (21). Thus the city is the apparition, "a symbolic diorama" (Rama 73). It is the urban ideal conceived in the sixteenth century as the crux of a Latin American identity that exists only within the semantic order of the European imagination. Its antithesis — that is, the rural — expanded "anarchically despite the efforts of those who wished to restrain and order its growth" and Alarcón captures this in his illustration of the disheveled "clowns" who attempt to ingratiate themselves into an exceedingly Europhilic community for whom they ply their trade and receive only contempt (Rama 82). "City of Clowns" not only illustrates the invisibility of the lettered city's "barbarous denizens," it likewise offers a palpable instantiation of a post-contemporary sense of disorder: "Lima ... playing tricks again" (Alarcón 32). We see a recuperation of the precolonial excesses which were whitewashed more by the "ascetic rage" of imperial Spain than by García Márquez in an increasingly pluralized community wherein the once rural Inca, for example, are the "metropolitan migrants" vying for position in the "beautiful, disgraced Lima" of Alarcón's imagination.

In the story, "Lima's mournful gaze" is made real in this image of her "in all her grandeur ... her cells her arteries, her multiple hearts" (52, 49). Lima — "beautiful" and yet "disgraced" — is both the pre-colonial fantasy and the postmodern horror. And the urban *mestizo* is not simply marginalized, but is indeed terrorized by the city. When Alarcón's narrator walks down the streets of Lima he states: "it was as if Lima were mocking me, ignoring me, thrusting her indifference upon me" (20). The "clowns" to whom Alarcón (and his narrator) refer are literal clowns — migrants who have found employment and a bit of anonymity as street performers and they are also figurative clowns: the displaced metropolitan migrants who are the objects of mockery and scorn by the neocolonial aristocracy of a thriving postmodern Lima, not to mention the laughter of their children, a "laughter that built community" (24). When Oscar (or *chino*, *la piranha*), Alarcón's narrator, joins the strange menagerie of street performers, he finds both anonymity and (as the displaced *indio*) seems to actualize his sense of self he becomes the masquerade. This is the ultimate confirmation of the signature invisibility of the Indian and the purely semantic nature of his ideal experience. In becoming the masquerade, Oscar is ostensibly performing his imagined role and he muses: "I knew in my heart that the clown was lying" (56).

Herein, Alarcón amplifies the absurdity of the now urban Inca. His McOndo city of decolonized clowns — "beautiful and disgraced Lima" — is ultimately a generic site of commerce, a translocal colony of a broken empire. Consequently, Alarcón's description of the city elsewhere as a kind of promised-land seems deliberately trite: "new people arrived everyday ... to construct a new life" (26). That Alarcón uses clowns infers a theatrical dimension to identity construction and his literal use of whiteface further enables a reading of "City of Clowns" as a space in which impoverished persons quite literally wear the costumes of invisibility that are created by a specific (geopolitical) configuration of power. Invisibility as a signature of the post-contemporary aesthetic is realized in the figure of the clown who exists only behind the masquerade. Here the reader is entreated to a subject whose nonverbal expression defies the lettered city: "Walking through the city, one-third of a trio of clowns, I was surprised to find how relaxed I was, and how invisible. You'd think the world's gazes would congregate upon us, on our loud costumes and our hand-painted smiles, but most people simply ignored us, walked past without a glance ... we were ghosts in the multitude" (42). Such invisibility is implicated in the transnational (post-contemporary) paradigm wherein a translocal community — Alarcón's clowns, Bolaño's "subway poets," and Díaz's *indios* — is cultivated in the spaces between the imagined city and the real polis. Thus, Alarcón's tale like that of Díaz often alternates between the two poles of postcolonial fantasy and postmodern horror: Macondo and McOndo. And more than even magic, such invisibility — the very lack of expression, again the *différance* — enables a precious subterfuge.

In Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* set in the city of Baní, a city "famed for its resistance to blackness" (78) we see a specific incarnation of the McOndo aesthetic made palpable through characters who are far more enduring than the *sine qua non* image of depravity that litters the pages of some of the *narcosagas* and like narratives of violence that seem to characterize the McOndo tradition. Díaz's protagonists — *la negra* and Oscar, the queer *mestizo* — are ultimately saved by magical creatures who live in the ethereal deserts outside of Santo Domingo. And the liminal city of Baní (where the deLeon family resides and where Beli's aunt built her "monument to *capitalismo*") is a specifically postmodern site — brutal and chaotic, urban, and real — over which men like Rafael Trujillo attempt to impose order through sanitizing campaigns that would seem anachronistic had the city itself not still bore the marks of colonialism, its fortresses still intact, its palaces thriving: Trujillo at the helm, one part postcolonial dictator, one part sixteenth-century imperial tyrant. Baní (like Pasco) exists in the space between: "blisters of a community that frequently afflict the arteries between the major cities, sad assemblages of shacks that seem to have been deposited in situ by a hurricane or other such calamity" (135). Díaz takes us "behind the Plátano Curtain" where, as his protagonist learns, people are broken" (225). In opting for the hyperreal (as over and against the magical real), Díaz reinscribes the heretofore "whitewashed" colonial history of Santo Domingo. Rather than satirize brutality, the author spectacularizes the violent reality of decolonization by inundating the reader with images of real death, real devastation, and real horror. Instead of casting the decolonized subject outside of "both culture and historicity" by turning brutal colonial histories into fantastical

impossibilities, such violent episodes impose a palpable and inescapable present (Gilroy 32). In the following passage, which refers to Beli (Díaz's protagonist) who is likewise an Indian emigré in the city, Díaz takes us back — long before the *maquiladora* and before the "platano curtain" was penetrated: "They beat her like she was a slave. Like she was a dog ... her clavicle, chicken-boned; her right humerus, a triple fracture ... five ribs, broken; left kidney, bruised; liver, bruised; right lung, collapsed; front teeth, blown out. About 167 points of damage in total and it was only sheer accident that these motherfuckers didn't eggshell her cranium, though her head did swell to elephant-man proportions. Was there time for a rape or two? I suspect there was...all that can be said is that it was the end of language, the end of hope. It was the sort of beating that breaks people, breaks them utterly" (147). Here, Beli — *la negra* — is beaten by Trujillo's secret police for the crime of conceiving the *mestizo* child of his own brother: her blackness is her most egregious crime and a reminder of the landscape some "180 years before" the reconquest — Trujillo's campaign to instantiate a postmodern "city of letters."

Way beyond Santo Domingo where the "cities had not yet metastasized into *kaiju*, menacing one another with smoking, teeming tendrils of shanties ... the urban dropped off, as precipitous as a beat" (146). And somewhere between the city and the country — between Trujillo and *la negra* — were placed two imagined communities: one, the realm of the magical mongoose (who will ultimately save Belí and Oscar) and the other, Trujillo's version of the lettered city. An exercise in pure artifice, Trujillo endeavored to create a community of learned men (*letrados*) whom he would ultimately destroy. The unwitting *letrados* of Santo Domingo were men like Díaz's Abelard Cabral, an erudite physician and one of many native men fumbling for a unique aesthetic. These lettered men were, in Trujillo's estimation, the "Fortunate People" (213). Cabral was "widely read in Spanish, English, French, Latin, and Greek; a collector of rare books, an advocate of outlandish abstractions" (213) and the host of rich parlor discussions which antagonized the desired order of Trujillo — a "Corbusian dream" that mimicked Cortazár's image of glass elevators, but minus the peepholes and dirty toilets. Cabral is herein painted as a sort of *letrado* despite his ironic subservience to the quasi-illiterate *Trujillato*. This cadre of learned men were posited as the ironic arbiters of a new autonomous Santo Domingo, but perished because the real city would indeed expand despite the efforts of an ignorant, sycophantic tyrant, in this case Rafael Trujillo. Santo Domingo is the "lettered city," a Baroque abstraction bending to the mechanized logic of the European polis. Its culture is represented by institutions like "El Redentor" where the Europhilic citizenry sends their children to become civilized, are signifiers of European culture (and hegemony), and Trujillo cultivates Santo Domingo as a proxy state for European interests by fertilizing the seeds of the "lettered" wealthy and exterminating the countryside. Santo Domingo is a fortress — its periphery (including both Baní and Outer Azua) surrendering to a hegemonic center — "the seat of administrative authority" (Rama 17).

On the periphery of the city, in the "blisters of communities," are the *indio*-s in places like Outer Azua from where *la negra* migrates. They are indeed "surveilled" by the grammar of an illusory postmodern landscape that contains them within the semantic reality of a "newly encoded" city that bears the markers of a global (rather than colonial) imaginary. And while folklore and magical mongooses (and magical realism) offered a sort of antidote to the terror of the city, such "rural" cultures did not reject the transformative effect of the new. They integrated it, instead, into the continuum of tradition, constantly rearticulating that tradition by selecting, discarding, and recombining its components to produce responses appropriate to the changing historical context" (Rama 64). Far from stagnating (subaltern) objects, they persist in a palpable present indeed. La Inca's magical spells and Díaz' postmodern *zafa* (or what he defines as his "very own counterspell") are not merely the "waste" lay aside by the urban Baroque, but are instead forcing a realignment of the imagined order. Far from the nefarious transculturation that bore a generation of *letrados* who aspired to European conceptions of aesthetic/literary merit — seeing their work as a native interpretation rather than conceiving a Native aesthetic — such "rural" persons as we see in the characters of Bolaño's Lacouture, Alarcón's Oscar, and Díaz's Beli represent a specifically Native aesthetic and the novels offer what is perhaps the closest thing to a Native syntax. This syntax, of course, is the articulation of the spaces in between, of the margins, of the invisible, of the

disappeared. It is translocal (rather than local) and it is real — urban and real. The invisible denizens of the urban real appear both as the protagonists *and* the ephemera of the translocal city.

In Díaz's novel, the exploited *indio* wields the weapons of the neocolonial Trujillo regime while maintaining a specific invisibility, a facelessness: the cop that beat Beli "didn't have a face," her father, before striking her "black cara de culo ... didn't have a face," and the men who would come to take Cabral off to prison were "faceless" as well (141, 261, 237). Trujillo's henchmen are often described as faceless, as lacking individual identity, and they are described as Indigenous persons exploited in their own poverty. This pervasive theme of facelessness is particularly striking given the corporeal excesses of the many violent passages throughout the rest of these novels. What they all seem to do is erase national or cultural distinction: Bolaño through actual decapitation in his now iconic 2666 within particular classes while maintaining, nay reifying, the larger geopolitical framework of the city and the invisibility of the "barbarous denizens" who have moved from the periphery to the center. We do not see the faces of the clowns, of the *Trujillato*, or of Bolaño's factory workers, but we know that they occupy a similar station: a new urban subaltern posited within a new (translocal) urban center. Díaz's absurd narrative of regress — his emancipatory *zafa* — collapses divergent Indigenous communities into a jingoistic Dominican Republic situated snugly behind the "Plátano Curtain ... a border that exists beyond maps, that is carved directly into the histories and imaginaries of a people" (225). Díaz's Baní is a translocal space where Indigenous persons from Outer Azua are centralized. Herein, Beli as nation recalls the anonymous narrator of Bolaño's *Amulet*: Lacouture, who as the "mother of Mexican poetry" foments a new nation of sorts from the remnants of the crumbling empire at her feet. Like Beli, she too is invisible and, like Beli, she suffers endless humiliation and defeat and is ultimately saved by magic. Here again, Díaz exhibits a "typically magical realist interest in the exotic world of spiritual or metaphysical phenomena" while remaining true to the McOndo aesthetic of visceral realism (López-Calvo 83-84).

Invisibility as a marker of the urban subaltern is pervasive and, rather than wax melancholic, in *Lost City Radio* Alarcón amplifies the artificial projections of Spain's Baroque fantasies in his post-apocalyptic metropolis "Newtown." Alarcón's novel replaces Márquez's elusive utopia with an Orwellian dystopia that transcends real colonial geography by placing its inhabitants on, for example, the moon: "uncharted and unknowable, a universe where the rules were still being ironed out and fought over, it was the frontier" (174). In *Lost City Radio* Alarcón creates a "Newtown" — clearly the jewel in the imperial design that casts its provincial capital — an "inelegant town of wooden houses clustered around a clapboard house" — simply as "1791" (26). Alarcón chronicles a generic Latin American city that exists in the wake of a revolution engineered by the "Illegitimate Legion": Marxist insurgents who are exiled to the "moon" for reprogramming and his post-apocalyptic city is surrounded by formerly thriving agrarian villages which bear only numbers (where once were names) and that are referents for their topographic locations. He has essentially reduced the narrative of colonialism to a trite formula that illustrates cultural imperialism as a normative economic program and cultural amnesia as a generic affliction from which most of the city's inhabitants seem to suffer. He even satirizes the genocidal campaigns which resulted in the "disappearance" of scores of Indigenous persons by inserting a wily artist into the mix who has an uncanny ability to recreate the images of the lost, a kind of police sketch artist who seems to draw seemingly formulaic portraits of "typical" Indian faces. Taking this a step further, he conceives of a means of cleansing the pristine city of its savages: *Tadek*, a ritual removal of a "criminal's" hands. This reference to village folklore — to Lima's prehistory as it were — recalls images of Macondo. The "provincial capitals" are presumably where such things occurred and as these rituals permeate the city itself, its "literate classes" — the beneficiaries of the implied genocide of the countryside — bask in their self-righteousness as the war finally makes its way "to the city's finer neighborhoods" (119). Such practices, of course, "offended the city's sense of itself: as a capital, as an urban center in dialogue with the world" (117). As a global capital, such brutality is an embarrassment and the Faustian presence of the Indian — no longer distant and ephemeral — becomes a daily reminder of what is neither imagined nor semantic, but viscerally, horrifically real.

Alarcón's novel is postcolonial insofar as he comments on the colonial genocide, but he does not adhere to the established postcolonial aesthetic, its signature depravity, victimhood, and desperation. Nonetheless, Alarcón's depiction of the wholesale erasure of Indian subjectivity is its crowning

achievement: he describes the way that Indian ritual was "patriotically legislated out of existence" thus: "all [of the] nation's unpleasant realities [were] excised from newspapers and magazines" and rather than offer a "nuanced reinterpretation of contemporary justice as seen through the prism of folklore," Alarcón offers a straightforward attack against such reinterpretation opting instead for the only possible place for a new Indigenous subject, the post-apocalyptic "Newtown," which is Lima (*Lost City* 116-17). Employing elements of the postmodern fantastic — the spectacularly tragic real of the post-industrial and globalized city — Alarcón infuses his gritty narrative with brutal depictions of revolution and the ritualized killings and/or mutilation of Indian men. The mutilation of the Indigenous informant Zahir, whose "new life began with music," is a succinct example of this scathing commentary on the nature of war and the ambiguous political positions of its agents ... particularly in neocolonial Latin America (249). The novel traces the story of Victor — the eleven-year old "Virgil" — who comes to the city to search for the lost villagers who were his community. "Lost City Radio" is actually the name of the nightly radio program on which Norma, the DJ and widow of Victor's father, airs the names of those lost in the war while narrating the daily life of the lost city. "War" is used constantly and somewhat ambiguously: an amorphous referent to the pervasive atmosphere of death and loss which dominate the novel.

Presumably, Victor (and his mentor Manau) are posited as post-apocalyptic conceptions of a new autonomous *indio*. The dynamic Victor seems to be both the unwitting savior of his people and a harbinger of a new world order and Norma, his surrogate mother, functions as the "mother to an imaginary nation of missing people" (not unlike Bolaño's Lacouture) whose "private life was antiseptic and empty, a place for memory, music and solitude" (61). Norma — as a symbol of the sterility of the imagined urban space — is poised against both a presumably virile mountainside — Rey's "beloved forest" — as well as the moon, a site of potentiality of the ilk of the original lettered city itself (256). Ultimately, the moon replaces the now defunct colonial project. Rey — Norma's now deceased husband, Victor's father, and a member of the "Illegitimate Legion" — is the invisible force behind the novel and his tale is told in fragments — memories, radio blurbs, and so on. This signature invisibility is again a subversive means of indigenous expression: Rey speaks through Norma's memories, Victor through an (at times) impenetrable silence. Through silence, invisibility, and erasure, Alarcón's dystopian novel offers a means of renegotiating the conflicting narratives of a postcolonial Macondo and a postmodern McOndo: the edifying hegemony of colonial syntax replaced with silence, an absolute lack of syntax and order. Additionally, while "all roads lead to the city," the use of numbers (rather than traditional signifiers) is a clever means of undermining the monocentric schema of the ideal city. And, while "barbarous denizens" do indeed hail from the countryside, characters like Victor — Alarcón's "child of the apocalypse" — defy normative postcolonial notions of identity, which cast the victims of colonialism as a collectively mute subaltern (Díaz 251). Victor retains a sort of agency by refusing to participate in the requisite cultural negation of diaspora: he arrives in the city bearing a list of names and he reads all those names.

Between the names of the lost — an act of reclamation and not of vain nostalgia — the silences Norma attempts to fill with music persist as a radical means of articulating the phenomenological experience of the Indians. We do not hear the silent nods, the invisible expressions and remonstrances which cannot be aired. If the signature of the "subaltern Boom" is a pervasive sense of postcolonial despair — a quality that forces a reading of all such persons as a tragic coda to a glorious colonial past — the signature of the post-contemporary Boom may well be such a lack of syntax, a perfectly silent invisibility. If McOndo offers a revolution in content — one that clearly fails in renegotiating the pervasive image of the tragic Indian — "Newtown" offers a revolution in form that at least attempts to transcend such strictures. At the "end of language" and beyond the lettered city there is perhaps silence.

Note: The above article is an excerpt from Stacey Balkan, *Working Toward a Phenomenology of Postcolonial Latin American Literature: Deconstructing the "Lettered City."* M.A. thesis. New York: City U of New York, 2012. and a substantially revised version with new material of Stacey Balkan, "'City of Clowns': The City as a Performative Space in the Prose of Daniel Alarcón, Junot Díaz, and Roberto Bolaño." *Wretched Refuge: Immigrants and Itinerants in the Postmodern*. Ed. Jessica Datema and Diane Krumrey. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars P, 2010. 89-108. Copyright release to the author.

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